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OP-ED

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Roan Plateau Open for.....Comment

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The draft plan for management of the Roan Plateau in western Colorado is now open for public comment. It represents unprecedented study and public input over several years and implements a groundbreaking new Bush Administration policy that specifically allows local governments and state agencies to act as full cooperators in our planning efforts. As a result, Garfield and Rio Blanco Counties, the Colorado Department of Natural Resources, and the towns of Rifle and Parachute played an active role representing local communities in developing this draft plan.

Through this collaborative approach the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is analyzing five management scenarios for the Roan Plateau, an area rich in natural gas and diverse recreational opportunities located between the towns of Parachute and Rifle. Management alternatives cover a wide range of options, from no new leasing to an emphasis on energy development. The “preferred alternative” seeks to balance energy development with protection of ecological and recreational values.

The Roan Plateau has a unique history. Recognized early on for its potential energy resources, portions were managed by the Department of Energy as the Naval Oil Shale Reserve for many years. In 1997, Congress transferred 56,000 acres to BLM and specifically mandated that the agency plan for energy development.

We estimate the Roan Plateau contains about 15 trillion cubic feet of recoverable natural gas; about 9 trillion of this is located on public lands. Although some estimates are lower, no one disputes the area is rich in natural gas. Currently producing wells have a 97 percent success rate.

The “preferred alternative” would allow natural gas development in designated areas under strict stipulations to protect the environment, including big game winter habitat and sensitive species such as the Colorado cutthroat trout and the Parachute penstemon. More than 90 percent of development would occur below the plateau and any development on top would be deferred for about 16 years. This concept, suggested by local cooperators, will allow us time to take advantage of any future technology that may lessen impacts. Should the top be developed, management restrictions will protect the plateau’s fish and wildlife, wild and scenic river values, and views. The draft plan presents other alternatives as well. We invite public scrutiny of all of these options.

Why drill at all? It is hard to imagine where our natural gas would come from if not from the abundant deposits on public lands that Congress has mandated be used to support the country’s energy needs. Natural gas is a clean burning fuel that is replacing coal in 95 percent of modern power plants. Demand for natural gas is going up, not down. It is projected to increase 50 percent in the next 20 years.

With new technology and stricter environmental requirements, gas development impacts have diminished significantly and will continue along this trend. Smaller drill pads, directional drilling, narrower roads, and co-location of support facilities make smaller footprints on the land. In addition, developers now are required to restore the land to its original condition – or better. (Many people forget development is not permanent.)

Renewable energy is often touted as an alternative to drilling. We agree, renewable energy is important and we are moving aggressively to assist its development. Since 2001, Interior has issued more than 200 geothermal energy leases and 60 wind energy right-of-ways compared to just 20 geothermal and 9 wind in the last four years of the previous administration. In fact, new wind energy development could be permitted under various alternatives for the Roan Plateau.

Although renewable energy has tremendous potential, it clearly is not ready to meet the nation's near-term energy requirements. Even in 20 years, the Department of Energy estimates that solar, wind, geothermal and biomass production will only account for 3.7 percent of electricity generated in the United States. More than 95 percent of our electricity will have to come from other sources.

The National Energy Policy wisely calls for a *balanced, diversified* approach, one that “plans for the future but meets the needs of today.” Achieving this requires *both* renewable and traditional energy production coupled with increased energy efficiencies and conservation.

The Interior Department is implementing an environmentally-sound, diversified energy program that addresses local concerns. We are doing this through an open, public process. The draft plan for the Roan Plateau is a perfect example. BLM will consider new information over the next three months before the agency and its cooperators write a final plan. I invite those who have an interest in this area to read the draft plan at www.roanplateau.ene.com and let us know how we can improve it.

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